

## **Visiting Lecturer Attitudes Toward Freshman English Students: Survey and Analysis**

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Freshman English students at Asia University (AU) are not as academically-focused as similar-aged university students in Western countries. Compared to their Western counterparts, they are also not as organized, nor are they as responsible or generally mature.

These are the opinions of 25 Freshman English (FE) lecturers and former lecturers at AU. The lecturers responded to a July 1999 survey measuring attitudes toward student maturity and performance levels, teachers' perceptions about the nature of their classroom activities, and the effectiveness of those activities.

Typically, FE lecturers emigrate to Japan from Western countries as visiting faculty members (VFM) for a period of three years. Their primary duty is to teach FE, which is divided into 22 graded levels according to student ability in English. The majority of visiting lecturers are American, while others have hailed from Canada, Ireland and Australia. Though AU enrolls a small percentage of international students each year, mostly from other Asian countries, the great majority of FE students are Japanese.

### **Analysis**

For many lecturers, their time at AU constitutes their first experience teaching Japanese university students in Japan. More than a few arrive with the knowledge that Japanese students have studied English for at least six years before entering university. Others have also been influenced by global stereotypes that paint Japan as a nation of workaholics, its people cramming for standardized tests in order to enter prestigious universities which will lead to lucrative corporate positions. In late 80s and early 90s, when Western economies were flooded

by a strong yen and exceptional Japanese automobiles, television stations around the world reinforced the image of Japanese as productive, tireless people by broadcasting images of Japanese workers doing group calisthenics before work in the morning, and crammed into commuter trains late in the evening.

It is no wonder, then, that many VFMs arrive with the expectation that the majority of their students will be academically disciplined, attentive, enthusiastic and operating at an advanced ability level in their FE classes.

In most cases, these expectations are dispelled within the first few weeks of teaching. In the survey, 22 of the 25 lecturers polled disagreed with the statement, "Given the number of years my FE students have studied English prior to entering Asia University, most demonstrate a satisfactory level of spoken English."

In a result that may be more indicative of many lecturers' opinions about student maturity, 10 respondents disagreed with the statement, "I think of my FE students as adults." One lecturer answered the question twice, indicating by writing in the margin of the paper that international FE students could be considered adults, whereas Japanese FE students could not.

It is the classroom behavior of Japanese university students that provokes the most disappointment in visiting lecturers. Unlike most similar-aged university students in Western countries, the majority of FE students do not take notes, do not complete homework, sometimes sleep in class, generally segregate in the classroom according to gender, and do not participate vocally unless specifically asked to.

Most lecturers agreed with the statement, "FE students should be expected to adapt to VFMs' teaching styles." In fact, many visiting lecturers spend the first several weeks of the semester trying to get students to alter their behavior to more closely resemble that of Western university students. Among the foremost concern is eliciting Western-style participation (encouraging students to ask questions during class, to participate in interactive class discussions, etc.). Yet, while most visiting lecturers at AU try to solicit Western-style participation from their students, they do not impose classroom management styles typical of

Western university classes. Twenty-two of the responding FE lecturers reported using participation point systems to encourage student speaking in class. Such systems, which in the past have included tossing poker chips, candy or other gratuities to students during class when they participated vocally, are almost never used in Western high school or university classes, nor are they generally used in language classes in other countries. Nineteen lecturers disagreed with the statement, "participation point systems were used in the language classes I took in university," with four lecturers non-responsive because they did not have language classes in university. An overwhelming majority of lecturers disagreed with the statement, "My classroom management style is typical of university language classes in my home country." It is widely believed among visiting lecturers that Japanese students require unique classroom activities and management styles to boost student motivation. At times, such activities resemble those used in elementary schools in Western countries. Examples: teachers often give small prizes—such as candy or discount coupons for Disneyland—to students who rack up the most participation points; FE students are often subjected to a "seating chart," used to desegregate the sexes and separate disruptive students.

Such methods are not unique to AU. In a recent presentation to FE lecturers, Marc Helgesen, author of the textbook *Firsthand*, acknowledged that techniques not normally used in university classes seem to work well in engaging Japanese language students. As an example, he suggested that rather than asking students to use normal pens and pencils to write questions on paper, Japanese students should be given magic markers to make colorful posters. Helegeson said that such alternations in style seemed more "fun," and, therefore, boosted student motivation; it was implied that without the use of such devices, writing in class could be perceived as boring by Japanese university students.

According to former AU Center of English Language Education (CELE) coordinator Rebecca Tanaka, in 1997, some Japanese faculty members at Asia University requested that visiting FE lecturers remove such colorful posters from classroom walls because they resembled "a kindergarten class atmosphere."

When asked about this perception informally, many lecturers believed that this type of atmosphere was appropriate for FE students, though many of their reasons seemed largely superficial. For example, some lecturers cited the brand-name accessories many of the students carry: Hello Kitty pencil cases, Snoopy bags, Disneyland pins and hats—items that many Westerners associate with childhood fascinations. Another trivial yet commonly cited reason was students' clothing—unlike the majority of Western university students, who have spent their high school years indulging in fads and by their university years are considerably more conservative-looking, many Japanese university students are just beginning to indulge in the trendy hairstyles, clothing and accessories that most Westerners associate with their teenage years.

The belief held by FE lecturers that their students are lagging behind their Western counterparts in terms of maturity has affected even the most basic of activities. During the 1999-2000 academic year orientation, for example, some FE lecturers shared the opinion that students could not be trusted to buy textbooks, organizers and paper for their classes. FE students are typically 18 to 19 years of age. Despite the fact that these students routinely buy paper, textbooks and other materials for their non-FE classes, many lecturers led their students as a group to the campus bookstore and lined them up to buy such materials while they supervised.

## Conclusions

Looking at the results of the survey, it is certainly possible that FE students are as disorganized, immature, unfocused and disinterested as VFMs seem to think they are.

We should also consider the possibility that some FE lecturers—and perhaps all of us—are reinforcing these negative stereotypes by implementing classroom management styles in Japan that would be considered too condescending, immature or inappropriate for similar-aged Western students. Because there seems to be no previous research to cite as evidence for this theory, the idea that FE students become more childish and incapable in our eyes through

our own treatment of them must remain, for now, just a theory. But what is clear is the fact that existing classroom management styles, activities and attitudes used in FE are passed on to new VFMs during the annual training orientation before the beginning of each academic year. Like new employees in any workplace, these new VFMs are eager to prove themselves capable and adaptable to the existing corporate culture; quite naturally, most begin by doing what has been done before.

When linguistic scholar Dr. Robert Kaplan visited AU in 1998, he took issue with the third CELE objective, which set teaching critical thinking as a goal in FE classes. Kaplan remarked, "I think it's condescending as hell to tell students that they don't know how to think."

Perhaps Kaplan had a point. If part of our goal in FE is to teach students how to think critically, are we really helping students by leading them by the hand to buy paper, telling them where to sit and how to participate in their classes? In doing so, it is possible that we are reinforcing the very stereotypes most visiting lecturers complain about.

Then there is this—why should FE lecturers alter their approach to teaching? After all, the majority of lecturers surveyed agreed with the statement, "In terms of increasing communicative ability, my FE course could be described as effective." So long as FE students seem happy with the way they are treated in the classroom, and with their learning, there would seem to be little reason for a shift in attitude or practice. Besides, it is well known among visiting lecturers that within the hierarchical systems of business and education in Japan, all subordinates, regardless of age, are considered children within the larger family; therefore, thinking of students as children could be considered in line with Japanese cultural practice.

Perhaps, however, it would be beneficial for each of us to examine our own approach toward our students, who are—at least by most technical definitions—young adults. Perhaps we should give careful consideration to what sort of cross-cultural relationships we would like to share with them, and what messages about foreign teachers we are sending.

In addition, additional research should be done to compare the differences in teaching styles in English language classes in Japan and those in other countries where English is learned

as a foreign language. Such a study might yield more accurate results. An investigation of the existing body of work of psychologists regarding how preconceived expectations affect perceived performance by students or employees could also be useful in our understanding of this issue.

### Quantified Survey Results

Respondents were asked to read each statement and circle the number that most appropriately described their opinion: 1=strongly disagree; 2=disagree; 3=agree; 4=strongly agree. The following lists the quantified results for the questions relevant to this essay. Questions used as distracters have been omitted from this list.

*#2) I use a participation point system to encourage participation in my FE class.*

Average response=3.08

Non-responsive=0

*#12) The majority of my FE students complete homework with the same diligence as similar-aged university students in my home country.*

Average response=1.8

Non-responsive=0

*#13) The majority of my FE students appear to be as organized as similar-aged university students in my home country.*

Average response=1.8

Non-responsive=0

*#14) The majority of my FE students appear to be as academically focused as similar-aged university students in my home country.*

Average response=1.68

Non-responsive=0

*#15) The majority of my FE students appear to be as studious as most university students in my home country.*

Average response=1.84

Non-responsive=0

#16) *The majority of my FE students appear to be as generally responsible as similar-aged university students in my home country.*

Average response=2.2  
Non-responsive=0

#17) *The majority of my FE students appear to be as generally mature as similar-aged university students in my home country.*

Average response=1.8  
Non-responsive=0

#18) *I think of my FE students as adults.*

Average response=2.5  
Non-responsive=1

#19) *Participation point systems were used in the language classes I took in university.*

Average response=1.38  
Non-responsive=4

#21) *FE students should be expected to adapt to VFMs' teaching styles.*

Average response=2.7  
Non-responsive=2

#25) *A teacher who has earned a certificate in TEFL/TESOL is likely to have better results teaching FE than a teacher who has earned an MA in Elementary Education.*

Average response=2.3  
Non-responsive=0

#26) *In terms of increasing communicative ability, my FE courses could be described as effective.*

Average response=2.96  
Non-responsive=0

\* *The 25 lecturers included a mixture of currently employed FE lecturers and formerly employed lecturers.*